DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 636 RC 021 494

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TITLE Jesse Stuart: Education's Folk Hero.
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Appalachian Studies Association (Boone, NC, March 1998).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; *Educational Experience; Educational History; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Principles; Elementary Secondary Education; Rural Education; Rural Schools; Social Responsibility; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Experience; *Values
IDENTIFIERS Folk Heroes; Kentucky; *Stuart (Jesse)

ABSTRACT

Jesse Stuart, poet, novelist, lecturer, teacher, principal, superintendent, educational reformer, and farmer, approached education as a calling or sacred quest. In his books he portrays the teacher as a devoted liberator and nurturer, a hero rescuing children and their families from decline, illiteracy, or economic instability. Stuart's educational philosophy was created from the perspective of the mythic tradition, which demands heroes and an enchanted view of the world. In "The Thread That Runs So True," he elevates his experiences to mythic proportions; he creates an image of himself as a folk hero whose naivete and commitment allow him to undertake and overcome challenges no sophisticated person would attempt. The seriocomical role of folk hero allows him to speak with authority without having to codify his theories. He saw education as a momentous struggle against ignorance, politics, and weakness. He fought bitterly for educational reform against politicians, school boards, and educators who looked out for their own interests. Stuart never formally stated his educational philosophy or explained its origins, but his writings show influences from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Dewey, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Carlyle, and John Ruskin. He deeply affected both the communities and educational systems in his region and in Kentucky. This paper cites examples of his work and philosophy from his writings, including: "The Thread That Runs So True"; "Beyond the Dark Hills"; "To Teach, To Love"; "Mr. Gallion's School"; "If I Were Seventeen Again and Other Essays"; "Cradle of Copperheads"; "God's Oddling: The Story of Mick Stuart, My Father"; and "The Year of My Rebirth." (SAS)

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Newton Smith

Jesse Stuart: Education's Folk Hero

By Newton Smith

ED 419 636

Though Jesse Stuart achieved most of his fame and fortune as a poet, novelist, short story writer, and lecturer, education was the passion that moved him deepest. Stuart approached education as a calling or a sacred quest. In his books he portrays the teacher as a devoted liberator and nurturer, a hero, rescuing children and their families from decline, illiteracy, or economic instability. According to Stuart, "We educate our people or we perish" (*The Thread That Runs So True* 284).

From Stuart's perspective, teachers are heroes, "responsible for the destiny of America" (82). "Within this great profession" Stuart believed, "lay the solution of most of the cities', counties', states', and the nation's troubles" (82). This perspective transforms a practical, economic, political, or social issue into the realm of myth. In fact, much of Stuart's attraction for readers has been his mythic view of the world. As Ann Rivers Siddons reflects in *Kings Oak:*

> Myths are the only real truths we have. . . . Without myths we have nothing to honor. (253)

The mythic tradition demands heroes and an enchanted view of the world. Stuart's educational philosophy was created from such a perspective, a world of larger-than-life challenges with him as the maverick hero. From his first teaching job at 17 in a one room school where he had to fight the bully who had terrorized his sister to his last public school job when he took over

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and restored a school in total disarray, Stuart saw education as a momentous struggle against ignorance, against politics, and against weakness. He positioned himself as a folk champion, leading the children and also their families toward a richer, less contentious, and more meaningful life.

Stuart's books are filled with his views and experiences as a teacher, principal, superintendent, educational reformer, lecturer, and ambassador. *Beyond the Dark Hills* (1938, 1996), his autobiography of his early years, chronicles his own education and earliest teaching experiences beginning at age 17. *The Thread That Runs So True* (1949, 1958), winner of the National Education Association's book of the year in 1950 and in print continuously since its first publication, tells the story of his years as a teacher and superintendent in Greenup County, Kentucky. *To Teach, To Love* (1970, 1987) collects stories and essays covering the middle part of his career in education, including his experience teaching in Egypt. *Mr. Gallion's School* (1967) is his attempt to counteract the social attitudes and the denigration of schools in the sixties reflected in the movies "Blackboard Jungle" and "Rebel Without a Cause." Stuart in this book fictionalizes his one year return in 1954 to the principalship of McKell High School where he had been principal from 1933-37. *If I Were Seventeen Again and Other Essays* (1980) collects many of his essays on education along with articles on character, freedom, and what it means to be an American. *Cradle of the Copperheads* (1988), published posthumously, bitterly describes his fights for educational reform against

politicians, school boards, and educators who looked out for their own interests instead of their students'.

In other books devoted to different subjects Stuart often digresses, picking up the topic of education because it is the central theme of his oeuvre. In his biographical novel about his father, *God's Oddling: The Story of Mick Stuart, My Father* (1960), Stuart treats his father as a teacher who, though he could not read or write, taught Stuart to read and understand nature. Similarly, Stuart's inspirational account of his recovery from a heart attack, *The Year of My Rebirth* (1956), includes significant passages about the great teachers who inspired him and transformed his life.

Stuart also wrote children's books with the intent of captivating his young readers' attention and teaching them moral or inspirational lessons at the same time. For some time these books were quite popular, and some were made into plays for children. Some of his books for children have recently been turned into videos and children's theater for the Appalachian region along the Ohio river.

The Thread That Runs So True, Stuart's most popular educational book, elevates his experiences to mythic proportions. He defeats bullies, school boards, and politicians, and leads his schools to academic and athletic championships. In this book he creates an image of himself not as the classic hero but as the folk hero, one who is frequently the laughing stock in the class, who comes from the lower classes, whose clothes don't quite fit, whose love of nature leads him to comic adventures with skunks and possums, and

whose naiveté and commitment nonetheless allow him to undertake and overcome challenges no sophisticated person would attempt. It is a role he relishes, because it transforms what he has to say about education into maxims and folk wisdom. The seriocomical role of folk hero allows him to speak with authority without having to codify his theory. He can make bold statements and be heard because the mask of the folk hero provides him the voice of authority and simultaneously excuses him from inconsistencies or errors.

Although Stuart never formally stated his educational philosophy or explained its origins other than to speak of the role of nature and the teachers who influenced him, his artistic and philosophical approach could easily have been torn from the pages of Rousseau's *Emile* – a belief in the spiritual and restorative powers of nature, in the natural goodness of men, and in the necessity to combat the destructive influences of society and the oppressive chains of government and bureaucracy.

Stuart's attachment to nature, learned in part from his father and his farming background, led him to maintain that education was a form of conservation, a way of preserving the nation's most precious resources and sustaining its cultural viability. He credits the foundation of his conservationist thought to his father, whose erosion control and fertility practices, along with judicious weeding, pruning, and thinning became a touchstone for Stuart. It was the idea of an agrarian approach to poetry which attracted him to go to Vanderbilt to study under the Fugitive-Agrarians there

(and disappointed him when he saw that these idols neither farmed nor gardened well).

Later, after his publishing career brought him prosperity, he became a true conservationist, buying and restoring land, planting trees, and establishing nature preserves. One year after recovering from his heart attack, he returned to McKell High School as principal for a year in order to restore order and respect to the school he had built up earlier in his life, and he persuaded his wife to return to teaching as well. His response to his wife's objections represent his conservationist approach to education:

> They turned onto a small dirt road, on both sides of which the long green acres of their farm stretched.
>
> "Who's going to take care of all this?" she said. "We'll both be away from home so much!"
>
> "Land can take care of itself more efficiently than youth. And," he added, "you and I will be human conservationists instead."

In *The Thread that Runs So True,* Stuart uses a metaphor for the role of students which again reflects his conservationist educational philosophy and its roots in Rousseau. In this passage he is protesting the assembly line methods of teaching in large, overcrowded schools:

> Our pupils were like young crowded trees growing up in a vast forest. They grew up very much alike. While in a forest where there were not so many trees, the growth was different. Trees grew up with originality, because they had not been patterned. This was the way it should be with young lives. They should be given the chance when they are young, to grow up individually and originally. (277)

In *Mr. Gallion's School,* he reiterates the metaphor, "[A student's] mind should not be left a culled young tree in the wilderness, but he should be

given some attention. As teachers it is our duty to help cultivate these half-choked and half-starved trees and give them a chance to grow" (94).

In many ways Stuart's approach to education is reflected in Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, an educational theory currently in vogue. From his first teaching experience to his days as a lecturer, Stuart recognized the teacher's job was to inspire each student individually to develop personal aspirations, something worthwhile to work for. He believed in the innate and unique abilities of his students and encouraged them to "flower and bring forth fruit in their season" (qtd. in Clarke 146). As principal he created a curriculum of many choices and welcomed the varieties of experiences of his students and teachers. He encouraged athletics, agriculture, mechanics, driving, music, art, as well as the traditional academic fields of science, math, language, and literature.

It would be a mistake to think that Stuart's educational approach is overly romantic and idealistic. As Mary Washington Clarke points out:

> Stuart's principles grow out of homely values from the nation's puritan and pioneer past: People respond to challenge. Competition breeds excellence. Responsibility develops self-confidence. Discipline is a necessary corollary to learning. Nature is a great teacher. Every student is an individual. He adds : "Love, a spirit of adventure and excitement, a sense of mission has to get back into the classroom." He likes to repeat phrases such as "awakening to the kingdom within," "teaching beyond the subject matter," and "conserving our [the nation's] youth." (131)

Stuart's approach to education is pragmatic, straight out of Thomas Dewey. In his first teaching assignment he showed his students and the men in the community how to use math to calculate the capacity of wagonloads so that

they would not be cheated (*The Thread that Runs So True* 52). Later, when he taught in Ohio for a year, he threw out the conventional syllabus for teaching remedial English and taught reading from the daily newspaper, taught writing from personal experiences and current events in the community, and taught diagramming from the newspaper as well. These students memorized a poem a week, performed dramas for other classes, and created a radio show. All but two graduated and most went to college (270). His focus was constantly on the individual child, and he believed that every child had a place and could learn and excel in some part of school life and in community life. His teaching practices were non-conformist. He used whatever he could to light the fire for learning in his students: farming, sports, art, academics, mechanics, love of animals, compassion for others, or competitiveness. He pushed his teachers and his students to excel.

Stuart endorsed Jefferson's belief in the necessity of an educated populace and universal education: "I learned to agree with Thomas Jefferson. I, too, have faith in the masses. No one will know from which family genius will come. Educating all is the only way to discover genius" (*To Teach, To Love* 9). While at Peabody and Vanderbilt, he had learned about Carlyle's and Ruskin's faith in education's ability to reform a community and lead a people to excellence. He fought for students, for teachers, and for the families in the community because he believed in their worth. He consistently refused to expel students, believing that as long as they stayed in school they could continue to learn.

Stuart was basically fighting for a kind of literacy for Appalachian children and their families. He began admitting older students into his high school because, "If our plans worked, I secretly believed that many Kentucky counties might follow what we were doing, and reduce illiteracy in Kentucky to a minimum" (*The Thread That Runs So True* 225). Yet his approach was a form of dialogue, the kind now promoted by Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Stuart expected to learn as much from his students as they did from him. And though he became their champion, a successful writer, a world traveler, and world famous, Stuart never stopped going downtown to Greenup, eating and gossiping with his friends, neighbors, and former students until he was too sick to walk.

Through his role as teacher, principal, superintendent, lecturer and gadfly, Stuart deeply affected and changed both the communities and the educational systems in his region and the state. His books have been a staple in education schools and an inspiration to teachers throughout America. *The Thread That Runs So True* continues to exert an influence on teachers, and for a while it was issued as a text with a teacher's and student's workbook.

Early in his career he campaigned at the state capital for consolidation and the elimination of the one room schools. Later in his career, he became for a short time a newspaper publisher in order to expose the venality and self-serving short-sighted educational system at the time in Greenup County and in Kentucky. He conducted a letter writing campaign to most of the officials in the state, and proposed a workable solution to the unequal

funding for schools created by the system school districts and tax districts. He also proposed a pension plan for teachers and a seniority system (tenure) to protect teachers from the local trustee system. He was attacked and shot at for his views. Though he was ignored by officials at the time, he was later recognized by Governor Edward Breathitt who asked Stuart to organize the Institute for the Education of Teachers in State Government. The seminar, taught simultaneously across the state was entitled "The Jesse Stuart Seminar on the Kentucky Constitution. . . In Implementation of the Poet Laureate's Conviction that the Future of Kentucky Lies with the Teachers of Today" (Blair 262). He later became an educational ambassador for the State Department, lecturing around the world on teaching, creative writing, and the American way of life. His example continues to inspire teachers the world over who see him as model even today.

Stuart changed the communities where he lived because he loved his students and knew that to truly educate children you have to teach the parents who bring the children to school. According to J. R. LeMaster in his introduction to an exerpt from *To Teach To Love* , "Stuart never lets the reader forget that the challenge to our system of education is one of both literacy and morality. Further he never lets the reader forget that the future of our civilization depends on meeting this challenge" (90). Stuart wrote *Mr. Gallion's School* to counter the alienation, boredom and rebellion represented by "Rebel Without a Cause" because "Why be a rebel without a

cause when there are some many good causes. Never burn a flag unless you have a better one" (LeMaster 144).

Stuart's strong emphasis on character education, firm discipline, and hard work today elicits the approval of conservative educators who want to return to the days of the little red schoolhouse. Stuart, however, was not a rigid traditionalist. He had fought for the benefits of consolidation; what he wanted was to revive the fun, the collaboration, the active learning, and the peer teaching represented by the one room school.

If we are looking today for the kind of school Stuart espoused, perhaps we should examine the Foxfire approach, developed in the mountains of North Georgia and now recognized as a model approach. Its eleven principles are:

> Students learn best when they are interested in their work; the teacher is a guide and collaborator; the academic integrity of the work is clear; students must be actively involved in the learning process; there is peer teaching, small group work and team work; there is a connection between school and the real world; there must be an audience beyond the teacher for student work; new learning should be based on previous learning; creativity, the arts and the imagination are all important to the learning process; students must regularly reflect on their own learning; an honest evaluation of skills, content and attitudinal changes must take place. (Foxfire handout for Teachers)

Even though a monument to Stuart labeled "Poet-Educator-Conservationist" is on the square in Greenup, no better monument could be imagined than to see the children of Kentucky, and all of Appalachia, and all America educated with these principles. Recall the epigraph Stuart quotes for *The Thread That Runs So True:*

"If we work upon marble, it will perish; if we work upon brass, time will efface it; if we rear temples, they will crumble into dust; but if we work upon immortal minds, if we imbue them with principles, with just fear of God and love of our fellow-men, we engrave on those tablets something which will brighten to all eternity." Daniel Webster

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